

## Casting light on social blame

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Professor Linda Blum has conducted scores of interviews among New England mothers raising children with so-called invisible disabilities. Photo by Craig Bailey

(PhysOrg.com) -- Mothers whose children suffer from emotional and behavioral disabilities say they shoulder a tremendous social burden of responsibility to remedy their kids' problems, says Linda Blum, associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Northeastern University.

Over the past few years, Blum, an ethnographer whose scholarship focuses on gender, family and [social inequality](#), has conducted scores of interviews among New England mothers raising children with so-called invisible disabilities, like attention-deficit and attention-deficit [hyperactivity](#) disorder (ADD/ADHD) and Asperger's Syndrome.

Neuroscientists believe that physiological differences in the brain are the most likely cause of such disabilities, from bipolar disorder to dyslexia. Nevertheless, Blum found that the mothers report they are frequently blamed and stigmatized by family and friends, doctors and school officials, as much as their children are by peers. Her findings held true regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

Parts of Blum's field study have appeared in the journal *Gender & Society*, and a book—Blum's third—is in progress.

“Mothers are held responsible to do all this work to resolve their child's issues even if they aren't seen as the primary cause of the problem,” Blum explains. “While it is accepted that the problems are neurochemical or in brain imbalances, they are seen as no less responsible in the sense of going through all these efforts to find every possible service, treatment or specialist to resolve the issue.”

Even moms of the highest social standing—those who are college educated, happily married and living in the most affluent communities—struggle to stand up to unrelenting criticism by neighbors and family members who question their parenting, Blum notes.

“Women who are in many ways so close to the idea of a good mother often torture themselves with thoughts of ‘What should I have done differently,’ or ‘If I had only done this,’” she says. And since ADHD, for example, or Asperger's, are not well understood, mothers face a barrage of conflicting advice, particularly surrounding the burgeoning use of an array of psychoactive medications.

“Mothers are dealing with the scary decision of whether or not to give psychopharmaceutical medications to their children,” Blum says. “That's not easy to deal with under any circumstances.”

Moms on the other side of the socioeconomic spectrum face an additional set of challenges, Blum says. For those living paycheck to paycheck, picking from a myriad of mental health professionals, paying for private schools or hiring educational consultants are simply not options.

The nationwide surge in wealth, educational and occupational inequalities, along with shrinking government budgets for social services, health care, and education, are making it more difficult for mothers of even moderate means to secure help for their children, she adds.

What's more, single mothers of children with these disabilities report struggling to earn the respect of health professionals and school officials because of their unmarried status. One single mom told Blum that she has had to "advocate 5,000 times harder" for her child than if she was married.

Blum hopes her research illuminates the plight of women and their families and helps frame these issues as social problems rather than those of the individual. "I want to make visible aspects of women's lives that are being swept under the rug," she explains. "Society often blames the individual and fails to look at the more embedded problems that the individual should not be held responsible for."

Provided by Northeastern University

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